

# Athenian imperialism in the fifth century B.C.

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How heavy-handed were the Athenians during the course of their domination of Greece and western Asia Minor in the fifth century B.C.? In this article Peter Liddel looks at the case of the city of Erythrai, in modern Turkey. An inscription found in Athens tells of Athenian interference there after Erythrai revolted in the 450s B.C. What was the effect of Athenian intervention in that city? How did the Athenians make their impositions acceptable to the Erythraians?

In 478 B.C., in the immediate aftermath of the Persian wars, the Athenians formed an alliance of Greek states. It was intended, according to Thucydides, to exact vengeance for what the Greeks had suffered at the hands of the invaders by ravaging in return the lands of their King. Its headquarters were initially on the island of Delos; it has become known as the Delian Confederacy or League. The Athenians were the leaders while the other members provided ships and money. Within twenty years Athenian control of the confederacy was firmly established. The Athenians moved the treasury of the organization to Athens in 454 B.C., and from this date it is appropriate to talk of 'the Athenian Empire'.

## Athenian intervention

The more Athenian power loomed large over her subjects, the more unsettled they became. The history of the Athenian Empire is peppered with revolts against Athenian rule. The Athenians responded in various ways, imposing garrisons, regulating the political activity of the states, and even introducing Athenian settlers to their allies' territories. Aristophanes' comedy *Birds*, first performed in Athens in 414 B.C., suggests that there was resentment at Athenian intervention. In that play, two Athenians decide to found a city, Cloudcuckooland, which will be beyond the reach of Athenian administration, where they might live quietly among the birds. But they find that their settlement is not at all outside the reach of Athenian power: they are visited by Athenian officials who introduce rules, impose fines, and summon the inhabitants of the city to courts in Athens. But how widespread was

such intervention? Let us look at the case of Erythrai.

## Erythrai

Erythrai was a city on the coast of Asia Minor (an area known in antiquity as Ionia) opposite the island of Chios. Fourth-century B.C. walls (p. 9 top left), theatre, and acropolis have been located close to the modern resort of Ildir, and this suggests also the location of the fifth-century city. Like other cities of Ionia, in the last years of the sixth century, the Erythraians appear to have been dominated by the Persians. But they joined the revolt of the Greeks against the Persians (the Ionian revolt) in the early years of the fifth century and after the Persian Wars joined the Delian Confederacy.

At some point in the 450s, the Erythraians revolted from the Athenians, and the Athenians intervened in order to bring the Erythraians back to the fold. A now-lost inscription, dated to 453/2, recorded the Athenian settlement. It ordered the Erythraians to bring offerings to the festival of Panathenaia at Athens. The Athenians imposed a new constitution on the Erythraians: there was to be a council, of 120 citizens, selected by lot (literally 'by bean') and overseen by Athenian officials. Limitations were imposed on who could hold office: foreigners were excluded, as were those less than 30 years of age, and no one was to hold office more than once in a four-year period. All of this is typical of a democracy. In addition, councillors were obliged to swear an oath not to revolt from the Athenians, not to allow exiles to return to the city, and not to be persuaded by those who had fled to the Persians; the oath also prohibited

involvement with those described as 'tyrants' (perhaps an anti-Athenian political grouping). Any who broke these regulations were to be prosecuted. The decree also mentions an Athenian garrison commander in place at Erythrai.

The Athenians probably exiled (or even killed) those who led the anti-Athenian uprising, but they do not appear to have interfered in the law-courts of the Erythraians, and they did not in this case send Athenian citizens to settle at Erythrai. However, resentment at Athenian intervention is suggested by Erythrai revolting from Athens again in 412 B.C., at a time when Athenian power had been dented by the defeat of the Athenian expedition to Sicily. Since aspects of the political administration of Erythrai mentioned in this decree appear in later Erythraian documents, perhaps they did not feel the need to abolish all the institutions sanctioned by the Athenians.

But there is another important aspect to this document: its language. This suggests that the Athenians were attempting to set out clear ethnic and political distinctions: the Persians were cast as the enemy at the gates and 'foreigners' were expressly excluded from the council. The interests of both the Athenian and Erythraian 'people' were contrasted with those of the 'tyrants'. By setting up these ethnic and political distinctions, the Athenians emphasized that the Delian Confederacy brought together communities who shared a common origin. By raising fear of 'tyrants', 'foreigners', and 'Medes', the Athenians were trying to make their intervention seem legitimate.

Not every Erythraian would have bought into the language the Athenians used: those opposed to the Athenian-installed democracy are not likely have called themselves 'tyrants'.

## The 'shorthand' of inscriptions

Inscribed documents such as this tend to focus on broad political distinctions and can over-simplify politically complex situations. But this 'shorthand' reveals Athenian prejudices and propaganda. Erythraian politics are unlikely to have been so clearly divided in this way:

certainly, a hundred years later Erythraian politics appears to be geared towards securing relations with local rulers in Asia Minor, but this did not mean handing their city over to the barbarians or the 'Medes'. A revealing contrast is provided by an inscription dated to the 470s from the neighbouring city of Teos. This arranges for the proclamation of public curses against those who harmed Teians, Greeks, or barbarians: an equal protection is given to all, regardless of ethnic identity. It appears to be the Athenians, not the Erythraians, who promoted strict ethnic divisions; they did so to justify Athenian intervention in terms of the war against tyranny and the barbarians.

### **Greek inscriptions and Ionia**

What would the Erythraians have made of such a set of regulations? A copy of the Athenian decree for Erythrai was probably set up in Erythrai itself. Would the Erythraians have so resented the Athenian imposition of regulations that like the founder of the imaginary Cloudcuckoo-land in Aristophanes' *Birds* they pissed all over the stone bearing Athenian regulations? What did the Athenians think they were doing by writing up these regulations on stone? These questions are difficult to answer, but we may get some insight from considering an earlier inscription.

Over the course of the sixth and fifth centuries, Greek communities began to write down selectively their official acts on stone, bronze, and other materials. Political regulations with public significance were inscribed in the Ionian cities from an early date: a stone pillar (above), inscribed on four faces, dated to the early sixth century B.C. and discovered in southern Chios, contains directives about how the people and council are to administer property sacred to Hestia, the goddess of the hearth. The red trachyte upon which this document was written is a stone widely used in Erythrai, and thus if this inscription actually came from Erythrai it would imply democratic institutions there in the archaic period.

### **The uses of inscriptions**

By using inscriptions, the Athenians sought to make the imposition of constitutional rule acceptable to the Erythraians who were already familiar with the use of inscriptions to express political messages. They may have done this in the hope of winning public understanding at Erythrai. At the same time the Athenians promoted political and ethnic distinctions which justify their power as a safeguard against the threat of the Persians. But the rhetoric does not altogether mask the reality of Athenian military intervention: the decree also talks about an 'overseer' and a 'garri-

son-commander'. Our lost document suggests, therefore, that Athenian power was a mixture of military and political imposition masked, and partly moderated, by regulations inscribed in decrees.

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